

# The Impact of Formal Mentoring Programs on Leadership Competency

Article

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## MENTORING

### A Historical Perspective

“If you do not plan for the future, don’t worry about it, someone else will do it for you.”<sup>1</sup> How true this statement is and organizations that fail to apply it as part of their vision will quickly see the ramifications. Whether it is looking at long-term financial stability, or as in this issue, if a formal mentoring program will have effects on the leadership competency of a law enforcement agency, planning is not just a good device to use; it is a necessity. Mentoring programs are a means by which organizations can plan for leadership succession.

Mentoring occurs both formally and informally. Informal mentoring occurs with a protégé identifying a mentor and using him or her as a role model. Informal mentoring in some cases also occurs with a mentor identifying a protégé and assisting in his or her career development. The informal form of mentoring is generally the most prevalent. Formal mentoring differs in that there is a structured program the mentors and protégés follow. As with any type of formal process accountability is vital. Mentors and protégés may be required to complete evaluations of the program along with other forms of documentation.

There are positives and negatives associated with both informal and formal mentoring programs. The factor tipping the scale towards a formal mentoring program is availability. A formal program is available to all employees who desire to participate whereas informal mentoring can be seen as selective.

Mentoring allows for the development of the organization's most valuable resource, its employees. Many in today's workplace, believe in offering valuable assistance to their colleagues who are striving to improve themselves, their organizations, and society. Mentoring enables individuals to gain experience and ability sooner in their given profession and allows organizations to move towards their goals. "Mentoring benefits every employee - civilian and sworn, veteran and rookie, male and female."<sup>2</sup> Mentoring operates on the assumption that people relate more readily and positively to peer assistance than to supervisory direction.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true of individuals who do not have a high level of confidence. Having an individual they can go to and feel comfortable asking questions of, goes a long way in the learning process and insures things are done correctly. Mentoring can be helpful and effective as an officer moves to higher levels of responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

For a mentoring program to have an impact on leadership competency, it must be embraced and applied at all levels within the organization. A mentoring program at the line-level will give individuals a better understanding of the organization and begin to provide them with basic leadership abilities. Leadership competency within an organization will only occur if mentoring continues from the first level supervisor through the executive staff. The transition from officer to sergeant is one that requires philosophical changes. This is evident by the change from being one of the boys to being one of them, referring to management. It also appears with the need to adjust personal vision to encompass a closer look at

liability issues. A formal mentoring program would provide these new supervisors with a mentor to help direct them around the pitfalls of becoming a supervisor.

A major portion of the learning skills needed for supervisors and managers is accomplished through experience rather than formal training. Mentoring is a mechanism that will assist in decreasing the time needed to gain the needed experience. Managers who are exposed to a variety of job related experiences are more likely to learn relevant leadership skills with the help of a mentor.<sup>5</sup>

Is the need for leadership competency greater today than in years past? The answer is yes; there is more need today to develop leadership in law enforcement than there has been in the past. In 2000, the Public Employees Retirement System began offering a three percent at age 50 retirement option. By November 2001, 158 law enforcement agencies that use PERS for their retirement benefits had subscribed to the new option.<sup>6</sup> Initially, many viewed the new retirement plan as an employee benefit providing a positive impact. Then leaders began to see the impact early retirement would have on the leadership within their organizations. In most agencies, promotional opportunities are cyclical in nature and usually can be forecasted. With the inception of the three percent at age 50 retirement plan, agencies are faced with multiple individuals retiring together and up to three years earlier than previously planned. The loss of senior leaders when planned has an impact on an organization; when it is not planned, it can be disastrous. This is especially true for smaller agencies where the percentage of impact could be devastating.

## Mentoring

Mentoring dates back to Greek mythology, where a friend of Odysseus was entrusted with the education of Odysseus' son, Telemachus.<sup>7</sup> Webster defines mentor as, "a trusted counselor or guide, coach."<sup>8</sup> Mentoring is not a concept that is foreign to law enforcement professionals, whether formal or informal. It is something that has touched everyone in one way or another.

Mentoring in law enforcement begins the first day of a recruit's career, when he or she has an opportunity to meet his or her tactical officers in the academy. These individuals become the recruit's mentors for the next twenty-three weeks of their lives. The recruits graduate from the academy and then begin a Field Training Program of twenty to twenty-five weeks. The agency provides the recruit with several field training officers, tasked with instilling the necessary skills to insure the recruit's safety and allow him or her to become a productive part of the organization by giving him or her a foundation to build on. This period of time is stressful for the new officer who has gone from the safe environment of the academy where mistakes only require remediation to an environment where mistakes can result in law suits, injuries, and occasionally the loss of life. It is during the field training process the greatest numbers of officers leave the profession by choice or by failing to successfully obtain the necessary skills needed by a law enforcement officer.

A formal mentoring program vanishes in most organizations after completion of the field-training program. This is unfortunate, as some individuals will not have the opportunity to benefit from having a mentor to lead them through the maze of the

organization. Mentors can provide new officers with the organization's history and provide insight into how to avoid obstacles in their quest for advancement. It is almost as if organizations insure that basic training is completed and then leave it up to the individual to develop his or her leadership skills by trial and error.

When there is not a formal mentoring program, some individuals will seek out those they see as role models and follow their example. This could be good or bad for the protégé depending on whom he or she chooses as a mentor. If the protégé chooses a malcontent as a mentor this could result in creating another malcontent within the organization, whereas a protégé who chooses a shining star will have a higher probability of becoming a shining star. This particular concern with an informal mentoring program is more applicable to the early molding stages of an officer's career than later stages. In later stages, he or she has a better foundation to use when selecting a mentor.

Mentoring programs for law enforcement agencies continue to become more important as the life experiences of applicants continues to decrease. Through the 1980's, a large portion of applicants for law enforcement positions had military experience. Today's applicants are more likely to have no military experience and to be living at home with his or her parents, both of which slows the life experience process.

Mentoring programs can have a direct effect on the retention and progression of women in law enforcement. "Women report they often feel isolated when they join the department and have no one to whom they can turn to for advice or support."<sup>9</sup> A

formal mentoring program will provide them with an individual to assist them in their progression.

It would appear on the surface that there would be nothing negative associated with a mentoring program; however, a program which assists in career advancement can have pitfalls. The issues of concern become known when the integrity of the program is questioned. To minimize this, organizations must insure mentoring programs are mandatory or, at minimum, available to everyone interested. The availability and selection of mentors, should be the most important components of a program.<sup>10</sup> The matching of mentors to a protégé will require a needs assessment to insure the relationship is not adversarial.<sup>11</sup> Mentors must be the cream of the organization; their integrity, values, ability, knowledge, and loyalty can only be of the highest level. Mentors provide their perspectives and experience to others in an effort to allow for career development.

### Leadership Competency

Leadership competency is an evolutionary state for any law enforcement agency. The experience and knowledge needed by today's leaders is overwhelming and constantly changing; twenty percent of what one knows today will be obsolete in one year.<sup>12</sup> Leadership requires a determination to move the organization forward on a foundation of ethical and professional conduct. This requires law enforcement agencies to begin to mold leaders not just for tomorrow but for the future. The number of experienced leaders today is shrinking in part because of the three

percent at age fifty retirement program and because there is a smaller number of individuals who are willing to make the commitments required. Lack of interest in upper staff positions, especially those for Chief of Police, is becoming more prevalent. This factor in and of itself is a reason organizations need to step back and take a long look at what is being done or more appropriately not being done to develop future leaders. The need for competent leadership within a law enforcement agency can be summed up by the following five axioms:

- The best predictor of the overall department performance is the quality of its leadership.
- Leaders are made, not born!
- Leadership development is the #1 concern of most organizations today, public, and private.
- Leadership skills need to exist at every department level, not just at the top.
- The complexities involved in leading police agencies are increasing, not decreasing.<sup>13</sup>

All indicators point to the steady increase in population for most cities at the same time law enforcement is traditionally behind the growth curve in obtaining personnel. This, coupled with the anticipated exiting of personnel who will retire by 2007, makes it imperative for law enforcement organizations to establish mentoring programs. The number of qualified and competent officers willing to assume



leadership roles within medium-size law enforcement agencies is on the downswing.

There are several apparent factors for this:

- Work schedules - Most agencies enjoy an alternative work schedules for their line officers, such as a 3/12 work week, while command staff is required to work less appealing schedules, 5/8 or 4/10.
- Compensation - Command staff is considered exempt, thus not entitled to overtime while line officers are non-exempt and receive overtime compensation.
- Job Duties - Men and women enter the law enforcement profession to make a difference by helping people and putting criminals in jail. Command staff very seldom performs these basic duties.
- Liabilities - Generally line officers are only responsible for their own actions while command staff is responsible for both their actions and lack of actions along with those of their subordinates.
- Political Demands – Command staff is faced with handling political issues on a regular basis.
- Complex Personnel Issues – Command staff is required to make decisions which determine who is going to be hired, fired or disciplined.
- Job Security – Command staff loss of civil service protection, at-will employee who serves at the will of the city manager or city council
- Unrealistic Demands – Command staff is expected to provide unrealistic performance by the community, city manager and or city council

The decline in interest for upper leadership positions, coupled with few formal leadership development courses, places organizations in a quandary of promoting someone who is not ready to step up to the plate or promoting the wrong person. Both of these choices are a result of not allocating needed resources and/or not planning for the future.

### Implications for Leadership

The development and implementation of a mentoring program will create challenges for the leadership of any law enforcement agency. The leaders will be the ones who are responsible and accountable for the administration of the program. Paying close attention at the start to the critical elements of the program will help minimize criticism. The areas of concern and where focus should be given are:

- Selection of Mentors
- Training of the Mentors
- Program Integrity
- Internal Sabotage
- Constant Program Evaluation

### Recommendations

Law enforcement agencies must be prepared for the challenges of the future, equipped with leaders who are willing to step to the front. There is an identified system which will enable agencies to build on the leadership competency and do so

while improving the overall effectiveness of the organization. A formal mentoring program will accomplish this task. While there is no activity or program which can ensure the development of leadership competency, a mentoring program will enhance the opportunities. Agencies who are willing to spend the necessary time to develop and implement a formal mentoring program using the roadmap previously described will see an increase in leadership competency throughout the organization.

### Conclusions

During the last ten years of the nineteenth century, mostly due to the information highway brought to everyone through the Internet, we have seen change happen at an astonishing rate and there is nothing on the horizon, which would lead us to believe this pattern, will change. Law enforcement currently is faced with a critical turning point by which no proactive action could place some agencies in a position of having no leadership to take them into the future. Traditionally, law enforcement agencies have done very little to promote leadership-related training. Programs offered by the International Association of Chiefs of Police along with the F.B.I. National Academy have tried to address this concern, but the need has outweighed the availability of training. It has only been in the last fifteen years that programs such as Supervisory Leadership Institute and Command College have provided advanced leadership training to help fill the void. Now faced with a need for leadership competency because of retirements and growth, organizations may

not be prepared. The creation of a formal mentoring program within a law enforcement agency will provide individuals with: the abilities needed to assume leadership roles in the agency, a more consistent perspective of the organization, and supply a higher quality of employee throughout the organization. The number of formal leadership positions within an agency is few in comparison to the number of employees. While a formal mentoring program will provide leaders to assume those positions, it will also provide additional opportunities to individuals who were exposed to the program.

The goal of a mentoring program is to cultivate one-to-one partnerships between new and veteran officers that will encourage employees to reach their fullest potential as law enforcement professionals. A mentoring program will be an extension of the existing field-training program and will be available throughout the organization. Focused on providing leadership competency, a mentoring program will provide for an organizational culture that instills doing the right thing all the time. Organizations which subscribe to an atmosphere of enhancing the capabilities of their employees will be the ones that blaze the trail into the future while the others will spend their time fighting forest fires.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Esensten, Organizational Effectiveness Consulting, POST Command College Presentation, "Building Strategic Organizations" (December 2000)

<sup>2</sup> Julie Williams, M.S., "Mentoring for Law Enforcement", Law Enforcement Bulletin (March 2000), 20

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>4</sup> Ross Swope, "Mentor the First Line Supervisor", Law and Order Magazine, (October 2001), 146

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Police Officer Research Association of California, "Are you part of the 3%@50 Club", Law Enforcement News, (December 2001), 39

<sup>7</sup> Webster

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Bureau of Justice Assistance, "Recruiting & Retaining Women: A Self-Assessment Guide for Law Enforcement", (June 2001), 6

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Norman H. Cohen, "A Step-By-Step Guide to Starting an Effective Mentoring Program", HRD Press, 2000, 6

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Barlow Jr., POST Command College Presentation, "Leading and Managing in a Continuum of Change" (December 2000)

<sup>13</sup> Irv Gamal, POST Command College Presentation, "Generation X workforce" (February 2001)

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